DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 276 918 CG 019 534

AUTHOR Shivanandan, Mary; Borkman, Thomasina
TITLE Couple Communication and Sexual Attitudes in Natural Family Planning.
PUB DATE Nov 86
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council on Family Relations (Dearborn, MI, November 3-7, 1986).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Contraception; *Family Planning; *Interpersonal Communication; Pregnancy; *Sexuality; *Spouses
IDENTIFIERS *Natural Family Planning

ABSTRACT

Natural family planning (NFP) refers to techniques for planning or preventing pregnancy by observation of natural signs of fertility. In using natural family planning to avoid pregnancy, there is abstinence from sexual intercourse during the fertile phase of the menstrual cycle. Social values which are incorporated into the method include couples controlling and sharing responsibility for their own fertility and the fact that NFP does not interfere with physiological processes. Rhythm is considered to be an outmoded method which has been replaced by the ovulation or mucus method and the sympto-thermal method. A key concept of NFP is joint fertility since it is the life of the sperm and ovum together which constitute fertility. In a NFP satisfaction survey previously reported by Borkman and Shivanandan, almost all couples who had been using NFP at least 2 years reported positive aspects of spousal communication as a part of NFP. Natural family planning communication provides cycle awareness for both spouses, thereby enabling the understanding of women's moods related to hormone levels. This cycle awareness, or fertility awareness, represents a new and unique form of communication for couples. Natural family planning is a mechanism for impacting communication, forcing at least minimal communication about the sexual relationship, and providing regular opportunities for discussion of intimate aspects of the relationship. (ABL)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

ED276918

# COUPLE COMMUNICATION AND SEXUAL ATTITUDES IN NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING

by

Mary Shivanandan
Director
KM Associates
4711 Overbrook Rd
Bethesda, MD 20816

and

Thomasina Borkman, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Sociology
George Mason University
Fairfax, Virginia 22030

CG 019534

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Mary Shivanandan

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Paper to be presented at the National Council on Family Relations Annual Conference, Dearborn, Michigan, November 3-7, 1986

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

This paper has two purposes: (1) to introduce natural family planning (NFP) to the marriage and family field as a family planning innovation that affects couple communication and family dynamics; and (2) to present findings from a secondary analysis of a study on the effects of practicing NFP on couple communication.

## AN EDUCATIONAL INNOVATION

Sociologically NFP is an innovation because it is an educational not a technological solution to family planning (Borkman 1979). Natural family planning has been described in some biomedical and family planning literature. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines NFP as:

> "Natural family planning refers to techniques for planning or preventing pregnancies by observation of the naturally occuring signs and symptoms of the fertile and infertile phases of the menstrual cycle. It is implicit in the definition of natural family planning, when used to avoid pregnancies, that there is abstinence from sexual intercourse during the fertile phase of the menstrual cycle." (Lanctot, 1979)

While the five-country WHO study and other prospective studies have found method effectiveness to be in the 97 to 99 percent range for the two current NFP methods, there are conflicting interpretations of user effectiveness rates (Klaus 1982, Periodic Abstinence 1981, WHO Study Finds 1979, WHO Task Force 1981, Wade et. al. 1979).

NFP proponents constitute a social movement in which several specific values are explicitly incorporated. Among them are:

* NFP does not interfere with physiological processes
* Men and women can have personal knowledge and awareness of their fertility
* Couples do not have to abdicate to professionals but can control their own fertility
* Both share responsibility for family planning, not just the man or the woman
* Abstinence need not be negative but can have positive effects on the relationship
* The practice of NFP can help the couple's communication and role relationship. It can become a "way of life."

(Borkman 1979)

Modern NFP methods should not be confused with Rhythm which is considered an earlier but now outmoded natural method. Rhythm

was based on mathematical calculations to determine the fertile phase in a woman's cycle, while the newer methods of NFP are based on sound scientific research on the fertility cycle and do not depend on regular menstrual cycles (Klaus 1982, Lanctot 1979)

There are two current methods of NFP, the ovulation or mucus method and the sympto-thermal method. The ovulation method depends on the observation and charting of the the mucus sign as a single indicator of the fertile phase. Without the presence of mucus in the woman's reproductive tract, the sperm cannot survive or travel through the uterus to fertilize the ovum. This mucus can be detected at the mouth of the vagina in advance of ovulation. Hormonal assays have been done, which have correlated the accuracy of the woman's observations with the amount of urinary estrogen. (Billings 1972, Hilgers 1979) The sympto-thermal method combines the observation of mucus with recording of the basal body temperature which rises after ovulation, the opening and closing of the mouth of the cervix and other secondary signs. (Roetzer 1981)

A key concept of NFP is joint fertility, since it is the life of the sperm and ovum together that constitute the couple's fertility. Natural family planning consists in educating the couple to understand their joint fertility and make decisions to achieve or avoid pregnancy as a result of this knowledge and their intentions.

Following from this concept it is recommended that both the man and woman attend classes together. The average learning period is three to four months with one teaching session of two to three hours each per month plus charting the fertility signs. The couple learn basic reproductive anatomy, the role of mucus in determining fertility and signs such as the opening and closing of the cervix and the rise in basal body temperature for defining the fertile period. They also learn how to apply rules for avoiding or achieving pregnancy. One of the rules is to abstain from all genital-to-genital contact during the fertile period if they wish to avoid pregnancy. (Natural Family Planning, Development of National Programs 1984)

Many people in American society view abstinence negatively as a deprivation (Borkman 1979). This becomes a factor in their acceptance and continuation of the method. Some programs try to help the couple integrate abstinence into their relationship.

Many early programs began as a grassroots movement of couples getting together to help each other learn and master these new natural methods of family planning. This was a non-medical lay initiative to take control of their reproductive lives (Natural Family Planning, Development of National Programs, 1984).

In 1975 Congress amended the law which provides funds for family planning to include the natural methods of family planning. This resulted in development of NFP programs in the public sector together with an expanding private sector initiative.

## STUDY OF SATISFIED NFP USERS

The second purpose of this paper is to report findings from a study on satisfied NFP user couples. The study collected in-depth interview data from user couples as described in Borkman and Shivanandan (1984).

In reviewing the research literature on the role of communication in family planning, we noted that interspousal communication is usually conceptualized as an independent variable that affects decision making about family planning. For example Hollerbach (1980) presented an original conceptual framework. The power bases between spouses were linked to the resulting communication processes, which were, in turn, related to decision making about the use of contraception or abortion. Communication was seen as an independent variable related to family planning decision making.

In Beckman's (1983) thorough review on power and communication in relation to couple decisions on fertility, communication is again viewed as an independent variable.

Communication in the family planning literature has been defined and measured in different ways. Interspousal communication can mean a very elementary level of discussion such as "Have you ever talked to your spouse about the number of children you would like to have?" (Bhatia and Neumann 1980) This communication was found to be the significant variable associated with adoption of a family planning method especially in developing countries. Communication in general, not specific to family planning decisions, and the openness of communication channels between husband and wife, have also been associated with family planning decision making, e.g. Mitchell (1972). In other research, interspousal communication is implied but not explicitly measured: the power relationship between spouses is related to decisions on the use of family planning or the type of technological method chosen (Mukherjee 1975).

The psychosocial research on natural family planning is sparse. Early psychosocial studies (Marshall 1970, Tolor et al. 1975, McCusker 1976, Heffernan 1977) emphasize such variables as religiosity or couple's perceptions of difficulty with abstinence since these factors were recognized as significant to the acceptance and continued use of NFP.

Recent studies are usually cross sectional mail

questionnaire surveys with a sample of persons who have been taught NFP and either use or discontinue its use (Daly and Herold 1983, Boys 1986, Klann et al. 1986). Testimonials of satisfied NFP users have enthusiastically described the impact of practicing NFP in improving their communication and sexual and marital satisfaction as well as leading to a more egalitarian relationship. Recent studies (Borkman and Shivanandan 1982 and 1984, Daly and Herold 1983 and Klann et al. 1986) find statistical association between communication and NFP variables but their positive findings are equivocal due to their cross sectional designs. Furthermore the nature of communication as a variable was not conceptualized in relation to NFP use in these studies. This may be partly due to the fact that the research literature on communication and family planning has not been used in the psychosocial studies of NFP.

METHODS

In-depth interviews with 50 satisfied NFP couples provided the data for this exploratory research. Two subjects were eliminated from the sample for lack of sufficient data. To develop the coding categories for each of the selected variables, a systematic secondary analysis of these data was conducted using content analysis. How the sample was chosen has been previously described in Borkman and Shivanandan (1983).

The sample consisted of 24 teacher/users and 24 users. While users were in the median age group 25-29 years of age, teacher/users were older, with a median age of 30-34 years. Teacher/users had also practiced NFP longer than users, with a median of five years versus two years for users. Ninety-two percent of the couples were married, the remainder divorced or single with all in sexually active relationships. Three-quarters of teacher/users were Catholic whereas a little more than half of users were Catholic; other religious faiths and those without religious affiliation were also represented in the sample. About 80 percent of both groups were white with two black couples, one Hispanic and four racially mixed couples. The socioeconomic level was largely middle class. The majority of the men had professional or managerial occupations such as computer programmers, insurance salesmen, and teachers. There were a few blue collar workers such as an electrician and an air conditioning serviceman.

It must be emphasized that this is a selected group of NFP teacher/users and users who were overwhelmingly satisfied with NFP and had practiced it for two years or longer.

FINDINGS

Communication

Most respondents were asked if they communicated on the charts. Thirty-eight couples responded about their communication since they had been using NFP. The overwhelming majority (92%) were positive about their communication in relation to NFP. Eight percent were neutral to negative.

An example of a neutral remark is: "My wife is reticent. She just says it's a good time of the month. An example of negative communication is: "My husband doesn't like to know about mucus."

Ten (or 26%) limited their discussion of communication to the technical aspects of the method. Another minority, eight (21%) responded that as a result of the method they had expanded their communication into other areas. As an example of how this happens: "If you can talk to someone about things like vaginal mucus, you can talk to them about anything."

Seventeen (45%) stated they had either initiated or increased discussion of their sex relationship as a result of using NFP.

> You become much more open about genital sex....You talk more openly about it. One advantage of NFP is that you have to talk about sex.

During the fertile phase when genital contact is not available, some couples reported that they substituted talking for sex. For many couples it was the first time they had discussed their sexual relationship since the method requires at least minimal communication on sex. Some couples stated that, at first, it was a struggle to communicate:

> The hardest thing to learn on NFP was the notion of talking about something we had never discussed before on a regular basis. We had never discussed fertility or Sue's bodily functions. It was difficult to talk about this. We found ourselves talking about sexual feelings. It was pleasurable.

Another significant finding was that the method itself provides both a vocabulary and a mechanism for discussing intimate aspects of the couple's reproductive life. This was especially significant for opening up communication by husbands.

A variable on the kind of communication was developed, communication on charts and symptoms or communication on the

sexual relationship or other areas. This communication variable was cross tabulated with cycle awareness, satisfaction with abstinence, joint responsibility for the method and attitudes towards the sexual relationship. No relationships were found. A major reason for the lack of association may be that the sample was made up so homogeneously of satisfied users who had integrated the method into their relationship. (Borkman and Shivanandan 1984)

A New Form of Communication

Family planning communication is generally conceived as verbal communication on a decision to use, the numbers and spacing of children, the method of choice, and discontinuation (Beckman 1983) but we have identified a new and unique form of communication that NFP provides, which we are calling "cycle awareness." The woman's body gives the couple continuous information on two things: 1) the fertility cycle and ovulation and 2) hormonal changes during the woman's cycle.

Information on the fertility cycle gives a new and different form of communication in the relationship that couples normally do not have access to and is not mentioned in the family planning literature. Secondly, the physiological knowledge of NFP provides an alternative framework for the woman and couple to interpret moods. Tension can be specifically linked to a certain phase of the cycle so that the woman or couple can adjust their response to the situation and each other.

Questions on cycle awareness were not asked by the interviewer because the phenomenon was unknown. In the NFP literature this cycle awareness is called fertility awareness but it has never been conceptualized as a different form of communication. Cycle awareness was spontaneously mentioned by 58 percent of the couples.

Ten women spontaneously mentioned how they were getting to know their body and cycle well. For example one woman expressed:

> It's so exciting to know how my body functions, to realize my own creativity and to be able to enter into that creativity more profoundly.

The continuous knowledge of their reproductive cycle by monitoring and charting it daily and the variations in hormones provided an alternative framework for intepreting the sources of moods and feelings. Instead of attributing moodiness and irritability to immaturity or "Something is wrong with me," moodiness can be attributed to hormone levels.

In some cases the woman seemed to use this knowledge of her cycle for her own self-understanding. For example, one woman

commented:

> I think it's a relief to know where you are in the cycle. It helps me understand myself. A lot of times I am really nervous. I look at my chart and see that's where I am with the estrogen. It may not help me not be nervous but at least it helps me understand myself a little better.

Other women use the new interpretive framework to control and modify moods; for example:

> It is nice to be able to attribute certain things to the way my body is functioning as opposed to immaturity and moods. Now I can overcome the mood better knowing that it is not me, my immaturity, my faults.

Of the 24 couples who were interviewed together, 12 (50%) spontaneously mentioned that they were jointly aware of the wife's body and where they were in the fertility cycle. An illustration of this was taken from one husband when they had only used NFP one year:

> We didn't know when ovulation was and this is a side benefit. We have become so much more intimately aware of her body....For us to be really aware of the function of the human body to that extent, things I never really learned in school or college, it is phenomenal.

Some couples expressed that this jointly shared "cycle awareness" gives a new quality of harmony to their relationship. One husband expressed it as:

> I think I feel a little more in tune with Sally and in tune with the world. We are not fighting each other in terms of Sally's cycle. This may be just a mental step that I get from knowing that we are not messing with Sally's body ....We are flowing better. There is a feeling of association now that I didn't have before.

## CONCLUSIONS

Although cycle awareness has been referred to under the name "Fertility Awareness" in the NFP literature, to our knowledge it has not been recognized as a new and unique form of communication between the couple. We feel this is a highly significant phenomenon since the method itself can lead to this new form of communication and thus alter family dynamics. This is a reverse relationship from that commonly reported in the family planning literature in which communication is the independent variable that affects the dependent variables of family planning.

We want to emphasize that this phenomenon of cycle awareness communication was found in a sample of relatively long-term satisfied NFP users. Research is needed to identify how frequent is cycle awareness communication and under what conditions it occurs.

The family planning literature hypothesizes communication as the independent variable that affects various dependent variables of family planning. This hypothesis has been confirmed in many studies of technological methods of family planning. In contrast NFP is an educational family planning method and communication seems to be better conceptualized as a dependent variable after adoption. The decision to use NFP is probably linked to communication and other variables in the same way as technological family planning methods.

What is interesting about NFP as a method that affects communication as a dependent variable is (1) the method, itself, is a mechanism for impacting communication, (2) the method, itself, is a mechanism to force at least minimal communication about the sex relationship and (3) the method, itself, provides a vocabulary and regular opportunities to discuss intimate aspects of the relationship. These points were confirmed in our data. In addition we identified a new form of communication that we termed cycle awareness as discussed above.

From this analysis and these data we offer the following general conceptualization of NFP use. NFP practice independently affects couple communication in several ways (as described above), which, in turn, impacts on the dynamics of the couple's relationship. Our cross sectional data do not allow one to establish causal relationships. Longitudinal research on NFP continuers is recommended to test our conceptualization.

REFERENCES


Beckman, Linda J.

1983 "Communication, Power, and the Influence of Social Networks in Couple Decisions on Fertiltiy" in R. Lee et al.(eds.) Determinants of Fertility in Developing Countries: A Summary of Knowledge, Committee on Population and Demography, National Research Council.

1984 "Husbands' & Wives' Relative Influence on Fertility Decisions & Outcomes", Population and Environment, (7)3:182-197.

Bhatia, J.C. and Neumann, A.K.

1980 "Inter-Spousal Communication and Practice of Contraception in India", The Journal of Family - Welfare, (26)4:16-30.

Billings, E.L., Billings, J.J., Brown, J.B., Burger, H.G.

1972 "Symptoms and Hormonal Changes Accompanying Ovulation", Lancet, (1):282.

Borkman, Thomasina

1979 "A Social-Science Perspective of Research Issues for Natural Family Planning", International Review on Natural Family Planning, (3)4:331-355.

Borkman, Thomasina and Shivanandan, Mary

1982 "Sexual Equality and Abstinence in Natural Family Planning," paper delivered at the International Symposium on Natural Family Planning, Los Angeles, California.

1984 "The Impact of Natural Family Planning on Selected Aspects of the Couple Relationship," International Review of Natural Family Planning, (8)1: 58-66.

Boys, Grace A.

1986 "Factors Affecting Client Satisfaction in Instruction and Usage of Natural Family Planning," paper presented at the IVth International Congress of the International Federation for Family Life Promotion, Ottawa, Canada.

Daly, Kerry J. and Herold, Edward S.

1983 "Natural Family Planning: A Comparison of Continuers and Discontinuers," Population and Environment,(6)4:231-240

Demographic Data For Development Institute for Resource Development at Westinghouse

1986 "Periodic Abstinence in Developing Countries: Update and Policy Options", Development, June

Garcia-Devesa, Consuelo, Lanctot, Claude, and Rice, Frank J.

1981 "Effectiveness of the Sympto-Thermal Method of Natural Family Planning: an International Study", International Journal of Fertiltiy, (26)3: 222-230.

Heffernan, Virginia

1977 "Attitudes of Some Couples Using Natural Family Planning, Communio, Winter.

Hilgers, T.W. and Prebil, A.M.

1979 "The Ovulation Method-Vulvar Observations as an Index of Fertility/Infertility", Obstetrics and Gynecology, (52):575.

Hollerbach, P.E.

1980 "Power in Families, Communication, and Fertility Decision-Making", Population and Environment, (3)2:148-173.

International Federation for Family Life Promotion

1984 National Family Planning: Development of National Programs, Washington, DC.

Jones, Robert

1983 "Birth Control in a Culture of Changing Sex Roles, the NFP Experience," Ed. D. Dissertation at Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Klann, Notker

1986 "Psychological Aspects of Natural Family Planning Practice," paper presented at the IVth International Congress of the International Federation for Family Life Promotion, Ottawa, Canada.

Klaus, Henne

1982 "Natural Family Planning: A Review," Obstetrical and Gynecological Survey, (37)2: 128-150

Lanctot, Claude

1979 "Natural Family Planning", Clinics in Obstetrics and Gynaecology, (6)1:109-127.

Marshall, John
1970 "Psychologic Aspects of the Basal Body Temperature Method of Regulating Births," Fertility and Sterility, [21]1: 14-19
McCusker, M. Peter
1976 "Couples Perception of the Influence of the Use of Fertility Awareness Methods of Natural Family Planning on Their Marital Relationship," Master's Dissertation, The Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C.
Mistra, B.D.
1966 "A Comparison of Husbands' and Wives' Attitudes toward family planning", Journal of Family Welfare, [12]: 9-23.
Mitchell, R.E.
1972 "Husband-Wife Relations and Family-Planning Practices in Urban Hong Kong", Journal of Marriage and Family, [37]: 655-667.
Mouli, A.S. and Prabhakar, K.
1983 "Inter-Spouse Communication on the Domiciliary Visit of Paramedical Staff and Family Planning Acceptance", The Journal of Family Welfare, [29]4:52.
Mukherjee, B.N.
1975 "Marital Decision Making and Family Planning", The Journal of Family Welfare, [21]: 77-101.
Population Information Program
1981 Population Reports: Periodic Abstinence, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD.
Roetzer, Josef
1981 Family Planning the Natural Way: A Complete Guide to the Sympto-Thermal Method--Including Questionnaires, Charts, and Reliable Procedures, Fleming H. Revell Co., Old Tappan, NJ.
Tolor, Alexander, Rice, Frank J., and Lanctot, Claude A.
1975 "Personality Patterns of Couples Practicing the Temperature-Rhythm Method of Birth Control," The Journal of Sex Research, [11]2:119-133
Wade, M.E., McCarthy, P., Abernathy, J.R., Harris, G. E., Danzer, H.C., and Uricchio, W.A., "A Randomized
1979 Prospective Study of the Use-Effectiveness of Two Methods of Natural Family Planning: An Interim Report, American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology, [134] 628
WHO Digest
1979 "WHO Study Finds Natural Family Planning to be 'Relatively Ineffective' Even With Careful Teaching", Family Planning Perpsectives, [11]1:40-41.
World Health Organization, Task Force on Methods for the Determination of the Fertile Period, Special Programme of Research, Development and Research Training in Human Reproduction
1981 "A Prospective Multicentre Trial of the Ovulation Method of Natural Family Planning", Fertility and Sterility,[36]: 591.
World Health Organization: Special Programme on Research, Development and Research Training in Human Reproduction
1978 Seventh Annual Report, Geneva, Switzerland